

WILDERNESS SUITABILITY STUDY



EL MALPAIS National Monument

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of wilderness designation, which is accomplished solely by congressional action, is to preserve and protect wilderness characteristics and values over the long term while providing opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation. With passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act (16 USC 1131 et seq.), Congress declared that it is national policy to secure for present and future generations the benefits of enduring wilderness resources.

Section 501.(c) of the El Malpais legislation states that, "The general management plan for the monument shall review and recommend the suitability or nonsuitability for preservation as wilderness of all roadless lands within the boundaries of the monument." The purpose of this study, then, is to evaluate and identify monument lands that possess wilderness characteristics as defined in the Wilderness Act and NPS *Management Policies*.

Although Congress could now act on the suitability findings in this document and any other information it chooses, the usual procedure in government would be for the Park Service to conduct a formal wilderness study, including an environmental impact statement, prior to the Executive Branch making an actual recommendation on wilderness.

WILDERNESS DEFINITION

The Wilderness Act describes and defines a wilderness area as follows:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are *untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain*. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in the Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or

human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

CRITERIA FOR WILDERNESS

Chapter 6 of the NPS *Management Policies*, "Wilderness Preservation and Management," states that wilderness includes

lands and waters found to possess the characteristics and values of wilderness, as defined in the Wilderness Act

lands that have been logged, farmed, grazed, or otherwise utilized in ways not involving extensive development or alteration of the landscape. (These lands will be considered for wilderness if at the time of study the effects of these activities are substantially unnoticeable or their wilderness character could be restored through appropriate management actions.)

The policies continue to say that lands will not be excluded from wilderness because of the following:

Management practices require the use of tools, equipment, or structures if those practices are necessary for the health and safety of wilderness travelers or protection of the wilderness area.

The lands contain prior rights or privileges, such as livestock grazing and stock driveways, provided these operations do not involve the routine use of motorized or

mechanical equipment and do not involve development and structures to such an extent that the human imprint is substantially noticeable.

An area possesses mineral rights and may be subject to exploration and development if it is likely that the mineral rights will be relinquished, acquired, exchanged, or otherwise eliminated in the foreseeable future.²⁴

The lands contain underground utility lines if these lines do not require the routine use of mechanized and motorized equipment. (Areas containing aboveground utility lines do not meet wilderness criteria.)

There are historic features in an area that attract visitors primarily for the enjoyment of solitude and unconfined recreation. (An area will not qualify if it contains historic features that are considered primary visitor attractions.)

Section 501(c) of the "El Malpais Senate Report," July 6, 1987, provides further guidance. The report states that

It is the intention of the Committee that the National Park Service apply the same criteria for determining which lands are 'roadless' as would be applied by the BLM; that is, the definition of 'road' found in the BLM's wilderness inventory policy should be used.

The Bureau of Land Management defines a "road" as "a vehicle route which has been improved and maintained by mechanical means to ensure relatively regular and continuous use." The BLM definition of a "way" is "a vehicle route which has not been improved and maintained by mechanical means to ensure relatively regular and continuous use." Therefore, areas of the monument containing vehicular "ways" as defined by the Bureau of Land Management are considered "roadless" by the intent of the Senate report.

The monument contains several vehicular routes that clearly meet the definition of a "way," which classifies these areas as "roadless." The ways were created to provide backcountry access for early timber and livestock grazing operations. These routes are a significant resource problem (see "The Plan for Natural Resource and Wildlife Management" section), resulting in compacted soil and erosion problems. The ways serve no particular purpose except to provide infrequently used routes for backcountry visitors. Some are nonroutinely used by ranchers for maintaining livestock grazing operations. As previously stated, this commercial grazing, which is authorized by Congress, will be discontinued after December 31, 1997.

INTERIM MANAGEMENT OF SUITABLE LANDS

All lands determined suitable for wilderness designation will be managed under the provisions of the Wilderness Act and NPS policies to maintain wilderness characteristics and values. Interim wilderness management will continue until designation by Congress.

Section 501.(c)(2) of the El Malpais establishing legislation states

Pending the submission of a recommendation and until otherwise directed by Act of Congress, the Secretary [of the Interior], through the Director of the National Park Service, shall manage all roadless lands within the boundaries of the monument so as to maintain their potential for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREA

A large portion of the monument is covered by lava fields, which, along with the limited availability of water, have historically restricted human access

24. The establishing legislation for the monument provided for BLM exchange of state and privately owned subsurface interests under federally owned lands including the monument. All state subsurface exchanges have been completed. Private exchanges are continuing. Interests yet to be acquired are shown on the Wilderness Suitability map. More detailed information can be found in the El Malpais *Land Protection Plan* (NPS 1990b).

and development and limited the exploitation of resources.

In contrast, the more accessible grass/shrubland and forested areas along the lava flow margins have historically been used and contain most of the evidence of historic development. These areas contain national and regional transportation routes including US 40, NM 117, NM 53, and Route 42; they have also been heavily grazed and, in the northwestern portion of the monument, heavily timbered. Most visual intrusions in the monument are associated with these activities and include roads and ways, buildings, overhead power and telephone lines, earthen and metal stock tanks, fences, windmills, and corrals.

The monument is bordered on two sides by designated wilderness areas – the 60,000-acre Cebolla Wilderness to the southeast and the 38,210-acre West Malpais Wilderness to the southwest. Additionally, the 17,468-acre Chain of Craters Wilderness Study Area, approximately 2.5 miles west of the monument, is under study for possible wilderness designation. All of these areas are in the national conservation area and are managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

WILDERNESS SUITABILITY

Using the wilderness criteria previously described, an evaluation of the monument was conducted by the Park Service, and approximately 97,428 acres or almost 85 percent of the monument was found to possess wilderness characteristics and values (see Wilderness Suitability map). The suitable areas contain no permanent improvements, have only minor human impacts, and provide outstanding opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation. They also contain important ecological, geological, archeological, educational, scientific, scenic, or historic resources. Other acreages identified as suitable are the areas outside the flow margins along the southwestern monument boundary that adjoin the West Malpais Wilderness Area, forming an adjacent NPS/BLM wilderness boundary. No lands were determined to be unsuitable for wilderness designation solely because of grazing or livestock-related facilities. In several places, the margins of the McCartys, Hoya de Cibola, Bandera, and Twin Craters flows were used to delineate wilderness-suitable areas.

Certain areas along the NM 117 corridor require additional study. These are the areas where the monument boundary lies outside the margins of the flows, and the areas outside these margins have not been determined suitable for wilderness in this study. The ecotone zones and the roads needed permanently for management and American Indian access have not yet been determined in these areas. This missing information will be collected and considered in formulating alternatives for the future wilderness study that must take place before wilderness can be formally recommended. In accordance with policy, this study will be accompanied by an environmental impact statement.

Monument lands that do not possess wilderness qualities and values and have been determined unsuitable for wilderness designation include approximately 17,420 acres or 15 percent of the monument. These areas include the following:

The 442.6-acre noncontiguous multiagency center site just south of I-40 near Grants – This site does not meet wilderness criteria because of nearby development and small size.

Approximately 152 acres of lands adjacent to roadways – Setbacks in these areas define the wilderness suitability boundary. The setbacks limit visual and audible intrusions while allowing for road improvements and realignments. The setbacks will vary with the type and standard of road, including 300 feet from centerline of paved roads, 100 feet from centerline of high-standard dirt or gravel roads, and 30 feet from centerline of low-standard dirt roads.

The road corridor to Cerro Encierro, which encompasses approximately 17 acres – This road provides administrative and public access to the monument's otherwise inaccessible southwestern Hoya de Cebola lava flow. The road is necessary for fire, search-and-rescue, and resource management operations. It also provides a back-country motorized recreational opportunity (as described in the "Visitor Facilities/Development Plan" section) that is unavailable elsewhere in the monument. The road is maintained by mechanical means on an annual basis.

The road corridor to Lost Woman Crater, which encompasses approximately 16 acres – This road provides management/administrative access to the east side of the Bandera flow and is necessary for fire, search-and-rescue, and resource management operations. Although open for access to private lands, this road will not be open for vehicular use by the public. The road is maintained by mechanical means on an annual basis.

Approximately 17,195 acres including development sites such as Bandera Crater, East Rendija, El Calderon, Sandstone Bluffs, Las Ventanas, the Zuni-Acoma/Acoma-Zuni trailheads, and the Narrows – This acreage also contains most of the roads that provide motorized access for monument protection and management (except for Cierro Encierro and Lost Woman, described above), American Indian subsistence and religious purposes, and ranching operations (to be discontinued by 1998).

POTENTIAL WILDERNESS ADDITIONS

Potential wilderness lands are those areas surrounded by or adjacent to wilderness that meet the criteria and would be suitable for wilderness designation if in federal ownership. However, because these lands are not currently in federal ownership and because federal acquisition of these private lands may not occur for a long time, these lands are identified as potential wilderness additions for the purposes of this study only. The Park Service will try to work cooperatively with these landowners to protect the wilderness qualities of their lands. Within the boundaries of El Malpais National Monument there are approximately 18,500 acres of nonfederal lands, 11,161 acres of which are potential wilderness additions (see Wilderness Suitability map).

IMPLICATIONS OF MANAGING LANDS IDENTIFIED AS SUITABLE FOR WILDERNESS²⁵

As previously described, all lands that have been found suitable for wilderness designation will be managed as wilderness until such time as Congress specifically designates wilderness at El Malpais National Monument. This entails the closure of all ways and ensures no use of motorized or mechanical equipment, including mountain bikes, motorcycles, and chain saws (by both visitors and monument staff). Travel will be by foot, horseback, or pack animal only. Caves with entrances in wilderness-suitable land will be managed as wilderness. Also, development within suitable wilderness will be limited to the those facilities determined necessary to carry out the objectives as defined in the Wilderness Act and NPS *Management Policies*. The construction of facilities incompatible with wilderness values or management objectives will be prohibited. (The existing intrusive and incompatible livestock ranching developments will be removed following discontinuation of grazing on December 31, 1997, provided that none of the structures are determined historic.)

Travel within the areas suitable for wilderness will be more difficult and require greater planning and effort. Elimination of routine mechanized and motorized usage will not be an inconvenience to livestock operators because existing ranching operations do not require routine mechanized or motorized use within areas determined to be suitable for wilderness.

The establishing legislation states that traditional American Indian practices may continue in El Malpais, consistent with the Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act excludes use of motorized vehicles and equipment in wilderness areas, and nonexclusive access will be by foot, horseback, or other types of pack animals. Certain locations within the areas suitable for wilderness may be periodically closed to the general public for short periods for American Indian purposes. (Coordination with the superintendent will be necessary to arrange such closures.) Otherwise, there are no important differences in the ways

25. Management zoning, described earlier, restricts many of the same activities and uses that the designation as wilderness suitable restricts (see appendix C).

American Indians may use lands suitable for wilderness in the national monument. It should be noted that, with few exceptions, most of the area suitable for wilderness has no roads, so designation as wilderness-suitable lands should not change traditional use patterns.

Research scientists who were required to camp in wilderness-suitable areas for prolonged periods would be required to accept primitive camping conditions and use of minimum equipment. Scientists wanting to inventory and conduct other research activities, including those associated with archeology, would be restricted in their scope of work. This would include the requirements that their projects would be allowed only if there is no other alternative to their research in wilderness-suitable areas and their projects would not interfere with other uses except for short duration. Electronic monitoring devices to protect cultural resources would be allowed only if determined to be the minimum necessary tool.

The Park Service would provide public information and interpretation about wilderness values, fostering an appreciation of these values. Visitors thus would be required to accept the land largely on their own terms, accepting certain risks that are inherent to primitive recreation (including potential danger from adverse weather and extremely rugged terrain). NPS interpretation and safety information would partly mitigate these hazards.

As described in the natural resource and wildlife management section, a wilderness management plan will be developed by the superintendent to guide the preservation, management, and use of the area. The plan will be developed with public involvement and will contain specific, measurable wilderness management objectives for the preservation of wilderness values as specified in the Wilderness Act and NPS *Management Policies*.

There may be a slight increase in the number of visitors seeking wilderness recreation experiences; however, this increase will not significantly benefit the local economy or add to the region's recreation opportunities.

Wilderness designation, and in this case determination of lands suitable for wilderness, will help ensure long-term perpetuation of wilderness resources and values while providing opportunities for solitude and unconfined recreation. The

elimination of vehicles will allow for restoration/reclamation of disturbed areas, enhance wilderness values, and increase the opportunity for solitude. For those who choose to hike or journey by horseback, opportunities for unconfined recreation will be greatly enhanced.

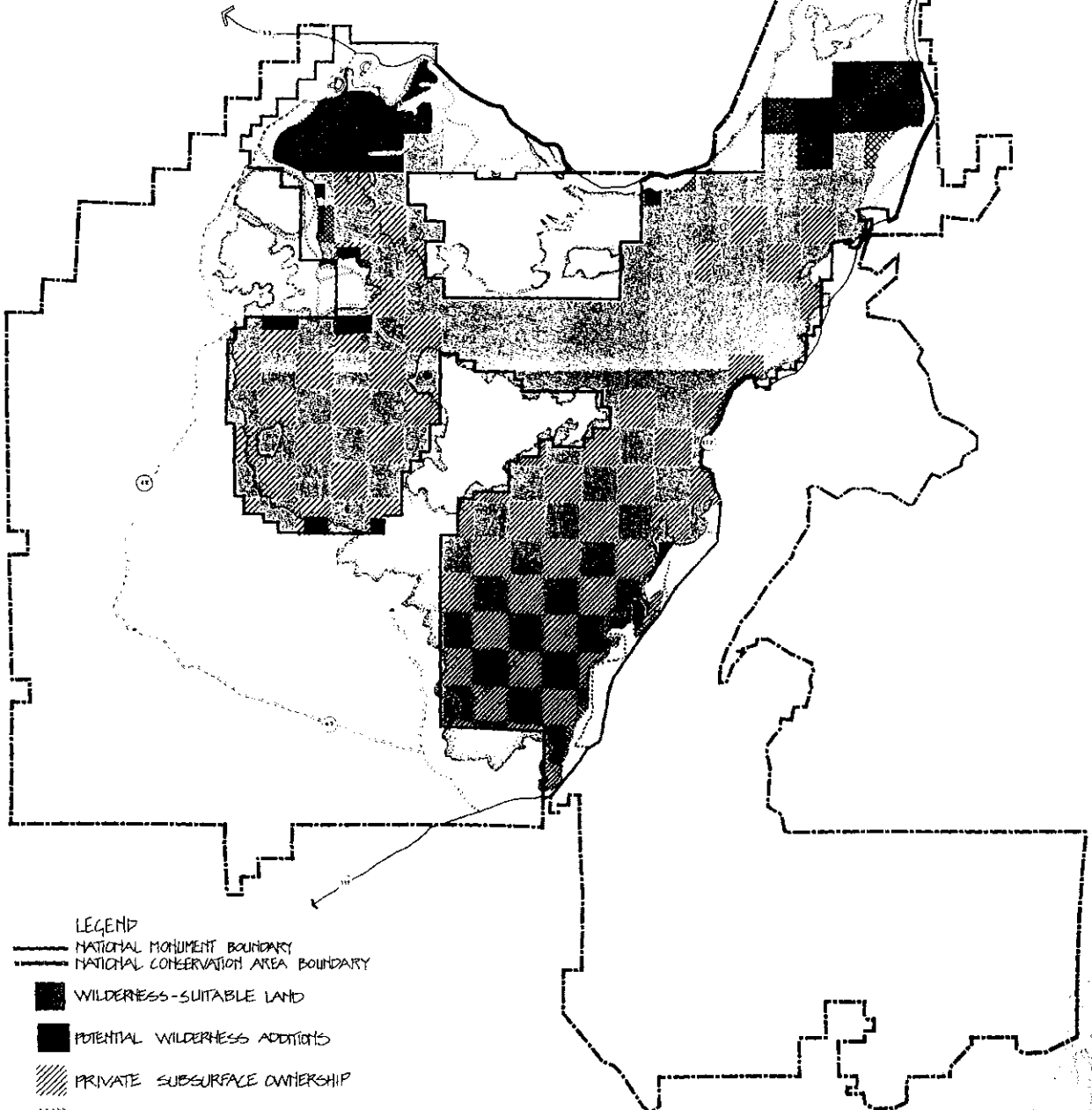
CONCLUSION

Most of El Malpais National Monument lands have been found to possess wilderness characteristics and values. This amounts to 97,428 acres or almost 85 percent of the monument. This total includes potential wilderness additions (wilderness-suitable nonfederal lands as described above).

Based on the analysis of the suitability criteria, the following four categories of land in El Malpais National Monument have been identified with respect to wilderness suitability (see Wilderness Suitability map):

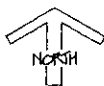
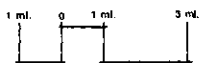
Suitable federal lands	approximately	86,267 acres
Wilderness additions (suitable nonfederal lands)	approximately	11,161 acres
Total suitable lands		97,428 acres
Unsuitable federal lands	approximately	10,031 acres
Unsuitable nonfederal lands	approximately	7,389 acres
Total unsuitable lands		17,420 acres
Total monument land		114,848 acres

WHITE AREAS WITHIN MONUMENT BOUNDARY HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS UNSUITABLE. PRIVATE OWNERSHIPS (SURFACE AND SUBSURFACE) ARE NOT SHOWN IN THESE AREAS. FOR AN ACCURATE PORTRAYAL OF ALL NONFEDERAL INTERESTS IN THE MONUMENT SEE THE MONUMENT'S LAND PROTECTION PLAN.



LEGEND

- NATIONAL MONUMENT BOUNDARY
- - - NATIONAL CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY
- WILDERNESS-SUITABLE LAND
- POTENTIAL WILDERNESS ADDITIONS
- ▨ PRIVATE SUBSURFACE OWNERSHIP
- ▨ PRIVATE SURFACE OWNERSHIP
- ▩ PRIVATE SURFACE/SUBSURFACE OWNERSHIP



WILDERNESS SUITABILITY

EL MALPAIS NATIONAL MONUMENT
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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